

# Office Setting as Organizational Structure in “Bartleby the Scrivener”

SAGE Open  
January–March 2017: 1–8  
© The Author(s) 2017  
DOI: 10.1177/2158244017690430  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo  


Lori Duin Kelly<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article uses a methodology from the social sciences known as institutional ethnography to analyze the office setting in Herman Melville's short story “Bartleby the Scrivener” as a site of social organization. This approach contributes to an understanding of how that office came to adopt specific structures as crucial to its functioning and how, as a consequence of those structures, individuals' roles within the organization's hierarchies became constituted. As fieldwork occurs inside of organizations, institutional ethnography also provides a tool for identifying and evaluating linguistic markers for an individual's placement within a larger organizational structure. This approach to the story seems particularly useful for understanding the interpersonal dynamics at the heart of “Bartleby.” At the same time, it provides a method for identifying the larger institutional process at work in Melville's story, one that contributes to the reproduction of a system of social relations in the workplace that requires subordination and compliance to insure its success.

## Keywords

interpersonal communication, human communication, communication studies, communication, social sciences, small group communication, organizational communication, literature, humanities, social anthropology, anthropology

## Introduction

Herman Melville's short story, “Bartleby the Scrivener,” is one of the most critically discussed works of fiction in American literature. The main character has been diagnosed as everything from a schizophrenic, to an autistic, from a person with borderline personality disorder to one with Asperger's syndrome. He has been described as a melancholic, a schizoid, a Job/Christ figure, a passive aggressive, an alienated worker, and an innocent victim, as well as an individual manifesting “pure potentiality . . . someone whose actions we ourselves should strive for” (Giles, 2007, p. 88). He has likewise been viewed as a symbol for Melville who, like his famous character, alienated himself from society by preferring not to copy the formula for the kinds of popular works that dominated the literary market of his day. All of these critics admit, however, that Bartleby, inspiring or not, is “the most provoking test of brotherhood one is ever likely to encounter either in fiction or in life,” an individual whose “power to exasperate is the kind that inspires legends” (Anderson, 1981, p. 386). The lawyer who narrates the tale has likewise been the subject of a similar number of varied critical perspectives. Thus, he has been described as self-serving in some articles, but well-meaning in others. He has been characterized as everything from psychotic to comical, from being nihilistic and devoid of social conscience to being Christlike. It is no wonder that Lewis Leary (1979) observed years ago that “no one key opens [the story] to a simple, or

single, precise meaning” (p. 15). Indeed, like few other works of fiction, Melville's “Bartleby the Scrivener” seems to draw critics—of all persuasions—like a magnet. Perhaps this is because, as Milton Stern (1979) has observed, “The story offers numerous ‘ideological possibilities’ and thus the seer of psychiatric, political, literary, metaphysical or religious positions is sure to find in the tale a paradigm for his own advocacy” (p. 19).

A view of the story that heretofore has not received any critical attention is one that applies the methodology of social science to literary analysis by focusing on the narrative's office setting as a site of social organization. As members inhabiting a specific cultural space, the narrator and his employees operate, as the sociologist Dorothy Smith (1990) has described it, within a framework of shared understandings and an organized sequence of actions that are “constitutive of the formality of a formal organization” (p. 219). Within this organization, they adopt protocols and patterns in their social relationships, which facilitate the functioning that is integral to the organization's day-to-day operation. Framing the narrative within this perspective opens up new

<sup>1</sup>Carroll University, Waukesha, WI, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Lori Duin Kelly, Carroll University, 100 N. East Avenue, Waukesha, WI 53186, USA.  
Email: lolidion@aol.com



understandings of the ensuing interpersonal dynamics within the lawyer's operation that occur following the hiring of Bartleby. It also helps explain why the manager is unable to act decisively with an employee who behaves in a manner that can best be described as "orthogonal" and why the threat posed by the presence of a Bartleby inside of an organization must be contained.

## Method

This article draws extensively on a method of analysis used in institutional ethnography which, as its name suggests, involves fieldwork conducted inside of organizations. By relying on peoples' actual experiences inside these organizations, institutional ethnographers are able to demonstrate not only how these institutions come to adopt specific organizational patterns as essential to their functioning, but also how, as a consequence of that functioning, interpersonal and hierarchical relationships within these organizations are determined and constituted. Because a reliance on individuals' actual experiences is central to its methodology, institutional ethnography also provides a method for identifying and evaluating linguistic markers that are helpful for understanding an individual's positioning within these structures. This method of analysis seems especially relevant to understanding the interpersonal office dynamics at work in Melville's short story, as it provides a workable methodology with which to explore issues like organizational communication, as well as the nature of work roles and relations among a specific group of individuals. It also provides a way to track changing patterns of behavior inside of an organization and the way these changing behavioral patterns come to be reflected in hierarchies and language patterns inside of an organizational space.

## Overview of the Organization of the Master of Chancery Office

The Office of the Master of Chancery in Melville's story has one manager, a lawyer, who also functions as the omniscient narrator of the story, and two employees with very distinct work pathologies: an older worker, Turkey, who is most productive in the early morning hours and less so as the noon hour approaches and his younger counterpart, the ambitious but frustrated Nippers, who pushes the work forward when Turkey begins to falter. A third employee, Ginger Nut, functions mainly as an errand boy for the operation. The prevailing personality trait of the lawyer who heads up the operation is caution. His preferred strategy for dealing with his employees appears to be an extraordinary willingness to order the way work is performed within the organization in a way that accommodates their eccentricities. It is obvious from what the narrator reveals that this style of management has worked well for him. His is, by the standards of 19th-century business

practice, a successful operation. This is apparent when he discloses that his work "among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title deeds" (Melville, 1853a, pp. 546-547) has drawn the attention of no less a personage than John Jacob Astor who had "no hesitation in pronouncing my first great point to be prudence, my next, method" (Melville, 1853a, p. 547). It is worth noting here that the values Astor endorses, at least as reported by the narrator, are ones associated with caution and practicality in problem solving. As the narrator notes that Astor himself is not prone to "poetic enthusiasm" (Melville, 1853a, p. 547), it is tempting to speculate on the extent to which Astor endorses individuals who display similar personality traits to his own. At any rate, what is evident is that Astor's endorsement of him has contributed in no small way to the success of the narrator's reputation. Appointment to the Master of Chancery office suggests that how the lawyer operates has won him the attention of those in a position to appoint him to a rather lucrative post. It also suggests that the lawyer has demonstrated an ability for organizing the work of that office in a way that has been recognized and validated by prominent individuals within the larger work community. Bartleby's hire is a result of the subsequent increase in work that follows on that appointment. As neither of his current employees puts in a full day's work, the narrator is drawn to Bartleby because he anticipates that he will have a positive impact on the personalities of the other employees in the organization. Describing Bartleby as "a man of so singularly sedate an aspect" (Melville, 1853a, p. 549), the narrator anticipates that his will be a calming presence that has the potential to "operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey and the fiery one of Nippers" (Melville, 1853a, p. 549). In the long term, this amelioration of Turkey and Nipper's behaviors is a practical move that will contribute to their greater efficiency and as a consequence, to even greater productivity within the organization.

## How Bartleby Functions Within This Organization's Structures

### *Impact on Workplace Product and Process*

At first, the narrator's decision to hire Bartleby appears to be a sound one. Consistent with the organization's role of providing a steady delivery of product in a timely manner, the lawyer's hire seems to fit well into the organization's existing structure. As a copyist, Bartleby generates an extraordinary quantity of writing in a neat clear hand. He is the first one in the office every morning and the last one to leave it every night. The problem comes when Bartleby declines or more accurately prefers not to discharge what the narrator calls "an indispensable part of a scrivener's business" (Melville, 1853a, p. 550)—verification of the accuracy of copies. The practice of reading copies to check for errors is constitutive. It directs social relations in the workplace, organizes and facilitates their functioning because it is integral to

the successful discharge of the work performed there. As a step in the organizational process, reading copies for accuracy is an example of what Smith (1990) calls the “apparatus” (p. 212) essential to the functioning of this specific operation as it coordinates the work process in ways that contribute to productivity and insure quality control. Indeed, so essential is checking documents to the nature of the operation that from time to time, the lawyer, in a symbolic show of camaraderie with this shared task, decenters himself from the role of manager to participate in it. By stating that he would prefer not to check copy, Bartleby derails this essential process. The narrator’s characterization of his request as “common usage” (Melville, 1853a, p. 551) with a “natural expectancy of instant compliance” (Melville, 1853a, p. 550) suggests a normative stance of acquiescence within the organization to this request. Thus, Bartleby’s preference not to read copy identifies him as requesting an accommodation for which there is no precedent. Moreover, Bartleby’s request to be treated in a singularly unique way generates a profound concern because with the increased workload, refusal to comply with this normative practice has the potential to derail the smooth functioning of the lawyer’s operation.

### *Impact on the Other Employees*

In addition to presenting a major challenge to the process and, ultimately, generation of product that is central to the livelihood of the Chancery operation, another impact Bartleby has in this workplace is on the other employees, Nippers, Turkey, and Ginger Nut. It is apparent that the senior clerks already manifest forms of hysteria “in line with the hypothesis of a pathogenic environment” (Mander, 2005, p. 220), long before Bartleby arrives on the scene: Turkey is an alcoholic and Nippers manifests recurrent stomach problems in response to what appear to be extraordinary stress levels. Bartleby’s incomprehensible actions are of a magnitude that has the potential to dissolve the smooth functioning of an operation that supplies them with a living while it has a proven history of successfully accommodating their idiosyncrasies. Even though accommodating the eccentricities of his employees is central to how the manager has structured work assignments inside his operation, efforts to accommodate a growing list of preferences from Bartleby contribute to unanticipated problems in the workplace. For one thing, accommodating Bartleby forces the lawyer to reassign Bartleby’s workload to his other employees, and in so doing, implement a dramatic change in the routine of office duties. However, at no point along the way does the lawyer draw his other employees into the decision by providing them with a context and timeline for his action. He could, for example, suggest that the refusal of Bartleby from copying is temporary, a move to accommodate the eyestrain suffered by overwork sustained in his early days on the job. Moreover, by dispensing with the requirement that Bartleby share in the process of reading copy, the lawyer restructures the nature of how work

is performed—and assigned—inside his operation. Predictably, the reactions of the other employees are overwhelmingly negative. They range from expressions of frustration to threats of violence. In spite of the fact that Turkey and Nippers have received generous accommodations in the workplace, neither employee supports the assignment of any workplace accommodation to Bartleby. More importantly, their discontent with the lawyer’s willingness to do so threatens the smooth functioning that the lawyer strives to maintain in his operation. Fueling their concerns is what scholars in business identify as a perception of inherent unfairness: Bartleby, the newest hire, is given different treatment at work from other employees who have longer standing with the company. As a result of their perception of such treatment of Bartleby as being exceptional, these employees begin to manifest what Adrienne Colella (2001) has described as specific attitudinal and behavioral reactions stemming from their sense of inherent unfairness. Nippers, for example, is candid in voicing his displeasure about being forced to “do another man’s business without pay” (Melville, 1853a, p. 551). For him, the solution to Bartleby’s dysfunction is simple, “Kick him out of the office” (Melville, 1853a, p. 551). This is a solution that not only removes the impediment to the office’s heretofore smooth functioning, but is also reflective of a sanctioned response to unproductive employees in the larger work culture that exists outside this office. Indeed, as the manager hangs fire and continues to debate how he should proceed, the hostility of Nippers and Turkey to Bartleby escalates and on a couple of occasions, rises to the level of violence, with Nippers “grind[ing] out between his set teeth occasional hissing maledictions against the stubborn oaf behind the screen” (Melville, 1853a, p. 551) and Turkey threatening to “step behind [Bartleby’s] screen and black his eyes for him” (Melville, 1853a, p. 552). The growing hostility of his employees to Bartleby contributes to a greater urgency of a response from the lawyer who manages the Chancery operation. In effect, the negative behaviors his employees manifest have the potential to disrupt employee commitment to the organization which, in turn, would have a negative impact on overall performance and productivity.

### *Impact on the Manager*

As the situation in the office escalates, the lawyer who runs it becomes increasingly dysfunctional when it comes to incorporating Bartleby into his organization. Temperamentally, the lawyer is conflict avoidant. This is perhaps why he has chosen to focus exclusively on reproducing accurate copies of legal documents, thereby avoiding the “turbulence” (Mitchell, 1990, p. 333) that is associated with work in a courtroom as a trial lawyer. Before the arrival of Bartleby on the scene, the lawyer, whom some critics view as being a man of limited comprehension, has been able to rationalize his solutions to tolerating both the disorder of his office and the eccentricities of his employees by making rather extraordinary concessions

to his two primary workers. The most notable of these concessions is his willingness to let them put in half days of work for a full day's pay. He also has set a precedent with them of excusing careless errors that have the potential to imperil the professional reputation of his office. One example of this is his willingness to back down from a decision to fire Turkey for mistakenly putting a ginger wafer in place of a seal onto a legal document. However, these concessions have taken place in secret, hidden from the eyes of colleagues and clients. Moreover, they are obscured by the fact that his office does, in spite of its inherent pathologies, get the work done both well and expeditiously. However, as Bartleby, and in particular, his growing list of "preferences" for what he will and will not do expands, the manager is confronted with a new problem: how to contain the growing resentment of his long-term employees who see their employer's efforts to accommodate Bartleby as extreme and unreasonable. While it is clear that he has gone to extreme lengths in accommodating Turkey and Nippers, it is also clear that his concessions to Bartleby have actually engendered new problems within his organization. In addition, his employees' responses to how he has proceeded with Bartleby have complicated his own understanding of what constitutes reasonable limits for one of his favorite management strategies. This is apparent in the lawyer's admission that with Bartleby, he is offering "privileges and unheard of exemptions," (Melville, 1853a, p. 554), a function, as he acknowledges, of "that wondrous ascendancy which the inscrutable scrivener had over me" (Melville, 1853b, p. 609). Ultimately, however, even the process of creative accommodation that has worked for him so well in the past is inadequate for dealing with Bartleby. Under no pretense can he keep an employee who, as things escalate, prefers not to do work of any kind and who will not take another job anywhere else. Bartleby's presence in his office, where, ultimately, he extends his preferences of not complying to requests made by other residents in the building, imperils the lawyer's operation because it renders visible an employment conundrum that the lawyer as the manager of this specific operation has been unable to resolve. His inability to act decisively with Bartleby highlights his failure as a manager and throws into question the viability of the entire operation.

### *Impact on Workplace Discourse*

The assigned roles and responsibilities characteristic of an organization are manifest in the discourse that is employed there, and it is in insisting on consistently functioning outside those discursive parameters that Bartleby presents the greatest challenge to the organization. Workplace discourse replicates organizational work practices and hierarchies. From an ethnographic perspective, ready compliance with the language practices in a workplace reveals the extent to which employees are both trained in and accustomed to speak within the discourse of their ruling institution. Evaluating how an employee mediates these discursive

structures lends insight into how effectively they fit into the organization's existing structures and hierarchies.

*The other employees and workplace discourse.* Turkey, Nippers, and to a lesser extent, the office errand boy, Ginger Nut, consistently function within the discursive parameters that organize operations within the Office of the Chancery. When asked to, these employees participate unquestioningly in what their employer has described as the "common usages" of the office, the most important of which is checking legal copies for accuracy. The reiteration of the phrase "common usages"—it appears three times in the story—underscores its importance as a linguistic marker in the discourse of the lawyer's operation. In addition, the use of the word "common" suggests the extent to which this feature of the workplace is seen as natural and normative,

as the way things are done and in some odd way as the only way they could be done, rather than as planned procedures and rules developed by individuals ensuring certain ideological ways of interpreting and acting on a case. (DeVault & McCoy, 2006, p. 331)

The lawyer's deployment of this term "common usages" serves an additional purpose when he is talking directly to Bartleby. It not only reinscribes his identity as a member of the legal system, but also suggests he is operating with care and deliberation when it comes to his newest employee, laying out the terms of understanding of the requirements of the job of scrivener, perhaps, as John Stark (1979) has suggested, "as though he were protecting himself from legal liability" (p. 169). At the same time, the repetition of these terms in conversations with Bartleby functions as a means of introducing him to the narrative terms of the official discourse that guides operations within the office that now employs him.

So embedded are the other employees in the Chancery office's work structures that when the lawyer turns to them for validation that his request to Bartleby to check copies for accuracy is a reasonable one, they form what Foucault (1978) has described as a "moving substrate of force relations" (p. 93). Activated in response to a specific situation and reproduced within the discursive structures that inform their understanding of how the organization functions, employer and employees converge to form a line of force that at that specific moment unites them in their opposition to what they perceive as imperiling their shared operation. Employee characterizations of Bartleby's actions as "quite out of the common" (Melville, 1853a, p. 552) and "quite unusual" (Melville, 1853a, p. 551) incorporate discursive elements identical to those of the lawyer, evidence of the extent to which their understanding of what is occurring inside the office is actually mediated through his. This critical view of Bartleby along with their unquestioning accession to whatever the lawyer asks them to do manifest what Liza McCoy (2006) has characterized as a form of "intellectual vassalage"



(p. 122). Accustomed to speaking and thinking within its ruling discourse, the employees in the Office of the Chancery not only share the lawyer's frustration with Bartleby's preference for what he will and will not do; their statements about Bartleby's actions align them with his view of the way work inside this office traditionally has been organized and is to be performed. In advocating for Bartleby's termination and dismissal from the firm, these employees likewise reveal their endorsement and acceptance of standard employment practice within the larger work community.

*Workplace discourse and the manager.* Gilles Deleuze (1998) has noted that by stating that he would prefer not to acquiesce to the lawyer's varied requests, Bartleby presents a challenge to how work is done because his response contributes a "new logic, a logic of preference" (p. 73) to the discourse of the workplace. As Deleuze (1998) describes it, the formula "I would prefer not to" creates a new exclusionary, one that distances itself from everyone and everything in the office. The lawyer's hope of bringing Bartleby back into compliance with how his organization has and must operate rests

on a logic of presuppositions according to which [he] . . . "expects" to be obeyed or . . . listened to, whereas Bartleby has invented a new logic, a logic of preference which is enough to undermine the presuppositions as a whole. (Deleuze, 1998, p. 73)

Indeed, his consistent response to the various requests posed to him by the lawyer that he would "prefer not to" constitutes a language that is both new to the workplace and unprecedented, one for which there are no clear rules or directives on how to operate or respond. As the narrator observes, Bartleby, when delivering his response, is neither aggressive, nor impertinent, nor confrontational, any one of which would initiate a solution to his dilemma because they would constitute clear grounds for dismissal. Instead, Bartleby's response is fully transgressive because it is activated in response to requests made in one realm while representing another. That is, in using the phrase "I would prefer not to," Bartleby responds to the request originated by the lawyer in a way that simultaneously asserts his own visibility and avoids the preferred modality of how his employer desires to operate. His statement stands in strict contraindication to the lawyer's logical presupposition that within this organization, the requests made by a manager regarding how the work process is organized will be obeyed. Bartleby's response of consistently refusing to engage in the way work is organized within the office signals, linguistically, his outsider status because it constitutes his attempt to maintain circulation in a discourse that originates and ends with him. If, as Foucault has observed, discursive production is productive of power and the propagation of knowledge inside of organizational structures, then Bartleby's repetition of his statement regarding his preferences in response to all the requests of the lawyer

also underscores his desire to maintain power within the linguistic construction he himself engenders. Bartleby's utterance of his preferences constitutes a narrative of resistance, a form of "oppositional talk . . . that takes a stance that highlights the differences between the institutional discourse and forms of knowing and being the speaker feels to be preferable . . ." (McCoy, 2006, p. 120). Such talk has the potential to generate a critical perspective on the official narrative of how the organization can and should function. The consistent iteration of his preferring not to threatens the viability of the lawyer's operation because of its potential to dismantle existing hierarchies within the Office of the Chancery, thereby derailing the way the work of the organization is understood to be performed.

### **The Search for Other Discursive Realms to Address the Problem**

Bartleby's insistence on maintaining an exclusionary status by operating outside the formal parameters of the Office of the Chancery destabilizes not only the work of that office but also the confidence of the manager who runs it. Unable to develop a strategy to contain this threat to his status within the power relations of his organization, the lawyer manifests behaviors that indicate he is becoming increasingly more desperate and uncertain about how to act. Whitehead, Liese, and O'Dell (1990) have noted that the narrator begins to show signs of psychopathology when he assumes on a walk to the office that everyone in the street is talking about him and his odd relationship with Bartleby. This culminates in his "panic flight" (Whitehead et al., 1990, p. 20) when he realizes the futility of all his efforts to get Bartleby to leave the building. But perhaps the strongest evidence of the narrator's desperation is revealed by the number of knowledge fields he deploys in an attempt to understand, presumably to contain and govern, his orthogonal employee. As Foucault (1978) has noted, knowledge fields, like the law and medicine, perform discursive functions that both contain and construct understandings. In the case of the narrator, these knowledge fields range from the frivolous—the speculation that Bartleby's behavior is due to a diet limited to ginger nuts—to the medical—inability to discharge copy work because of eyestrain brought on by overwork. He likewise invokes a wide range of authorities, looking for direction in such varied sources as the New Testament to philosophers, such as Joseph Priestly, on predestination. The lawyer maneuvers at rapid speed through this constantly evolving field of experts, evidence of his dissatisfaction with the ability of any one of them to resolve his dilemma on how to integrate Bartleby more effectively into his organization. After reading Priestly, for example, the lawyer becomes convinced that he was destined to connect with Bartleby whom he views as sent by God to make him a better human being. However, as pressure from his colleagues in the legal profession mounts, the

lawyer just as quickly abjures that position because it becomes apparent that any display of loyalty to Bartleby has the potential to imperil his livelihood and reputation. Bartleby's continuing insistence on excluding himself from the performance of work activities by preferring not to participate in them destabilizes the coherence of the official narrative that the lawyer has relied on to guide the relationships and work assignments in his office. Destabilizing the official narrative imperils the continuance of the organization. Moreover, none of the knowledge systems he deploys, whether medical, theological, or philosophical, provides the lawyer with guidance on how to construct an organization that reconciles his desire to secure a comfortable life and the esteem of his employees with Bartleby as part of the operation. The lawyer's maneuvering at rapid speed through a wide and varied realm of discursive fields not only illustrates the destabilizing effect Bartleby has had on the organization's operation, it is also evidence of the lawyer's desperation to find a way to find an organizational structure that will allow him to continue to accommodate all of his employees while yet maintaining the steady output of product necessary for the organization to continue.

### ***Why Legal Discourse Is an Effective Solution***

The solution to the Bartleby "problem" comes from the landlord of the building that houses the lawyer's operation. The landlord's organization is comprised of a number of lucrative rental spaces in this building. His ability to attract and retain renters is compromised by the dysfunction within one of his rental units. To save his operation, which is his primary and only concern, the landlord gets the court to arrest Bartleby on charges of vagrancy, an action that results in his removal from the premises and consignment to prison at the Tombs. Although the lawyer debates whether the legal term "vagrant" was even appropriate for someone who essentially inhabited a single building, and who, in fact, had managed to support himself, he complies with the legal decision, unwilling, as per usual, to make waves. The conviction and consignment of Bartleby to prison provides closure to a problem that the narrator and the larger society within which he operates faced: They now have a term whereby they can contain—and delimit—a Bartleby as well as a mechanism for initiating a line of action that will ensure his erasure as an impediment to work operations in the building. The law represents a sanctioned form of discourse, one which directs a specific course of action. The use of the term "vagrant" to describe Bartleby effectually displaces him from the context of one cultural space and repositions him inside another, one with its own constitutive structures.

Bartleby's arrest proves a boon for the lawyer on many levels. For one thing, it insures that the organizational structure that had proven so successful to work activity in the office can resume, in large part because of the removal of the one impediment to its implementation. Bartleby's removal

from the Office of the Chancery likewise contributes to the reauthorization of the discourse of that workplace, an action that is not only essential to directing how that work is to be performed but also to clarifying and structuring the power relations essential to facilitating its operation. Indeed, perhaps the greatest threat Bartleby posed to the lawyer's operation was in this area. The growing frequency with which the other employees in the Office of Chancery begin to use the term "prefer" in their conversations manifests not only the facility with which that term has become incorporated into the discourse of the workplace but also its potential to upend and transform the organizational structures within which the scribes have traditionally operated. The term "prefer" is, as Friedman (1966) suggests, constitutive of an alternative of how business operations generally occur, as linguistically, it represents a

strange reversal of situation that allows the employee rather than the employer to stipulate the terms of work, especially when this stipulation is not based on any contractual agreement or mutual bargaining but upon an entirely unexplained and undefended "I prefer not to." (p. 67)

Bartleby's removal from the office, facilitated by the deployment of the legal charge that he is a vagrant, insures that his favored response will likewise disappear with him, thereby neutralizing its potency in narrative terms of an official discourse for guiding work activities within the lawyer's operation.

### **The Lawyer's Fate: Fallout From a Failure to Act Decisively**

Ultimately, even the removal of Bartleby from his office is not enough to prevent the lawyer's professional downfall. At the end of Melville's story, he reveals that he has lost his position in the Office of the Chancery, a position that he had counted on as a lifetime appointment. Ironically, his fate mirrors that of his orthogonal employee. Like Bartleby who came to the lawyer's operation after losing his clerkship in the Dead Letter Office in Washington because of "a change in the administration" (Melville, 1853b, p. 614), the narrator has likewise lost his position as Master of Chancery because of a change in the state of New York's Constitution. Like Bartleby, then, the lawyer experiences firsthand what it is to be a subordinate within the moving substrate that characterizes all exchanges of power. In falling from favor, the lawyer has direct experience of the conditionality and the fragility that characterize all subordinative relationships. Indeed, given the lawyer's turn from personal growth in caring for Bartleby to concern for his own survival, perhaps the message of the story is one which concerns the fragile presumption on which all relationships, both inside and outside the office, ultimately rest. At the same time, "Bartleby the Scrivener" is powerful testimony to the threat inherent in simple declarations and to

the potential they have to upend and destabilize the coherence of official narratives that guide and organize sequences of action inside of ruling institutions.

## Conclusion

The use of methodology from the social sciences, in particular, the application of methods used by institutional ethnographers to the analysis of the office setting in Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," provides a useful tool for identifying and analyzing the nature of power relations within the organization that is the setting of the story. It also provides a mechanism with which to identify how employees working within that environment mediate and negotiate its structure. At the same time, by making central to its methodology the voice of participants within the organization, an ethnographic approach contributes to an understanding of the role played by the discursive constructions that structure and organize work activities within such institutions as well as the roles and relationships that result as individuals function within those organizational structures and discursive constructions. As the narrative of Bartleby suggests, success in the Office of Chancery is manifested by a consistent and unreflective response to a specific sanctioned form of discourse, in this case, an uncontested agreement to read documents for errors. Bartleby's continuing insistence on preferring not to do this as well as other work activities deemed essential to the success of this organization, underscores his outsider status as reflected in this dominant discursive paradigm, just as, over time, its unconscious insertion into the casual conversations of the other employees in the Chancery office signals its potential to dismantle the terms of understanding on which the business must operate to be successful. Indeed, as the concerted effort to remove him from the Chancery office suggests, his behaviors, in particular, his utterance of a preference that is so at odds with the expectation for how employees are to perform their work functions within the office's existing organizational hierarchies is powerful testimony to the threat inherent in simple declarations and to the potential they have to upend and destabilize the coherence of official narratives that guide and organize sequences of action inside of ruling institutions.

An ethnographic approach to Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby the Scrivener," also opens up new understandings of the office setting that is at the heart of the story. It helps readers understand why the office, a site of social organization, adopts specific structures as crucial to its functioning. It also deepens an awareness of how roles and hierarchies within the organization are consequences of those choices. Ethnography also provides tools for identifying and evaluating linguistic markers of an individual's positioning within organizational structures. In doing so, it provides a theoretical context within which to understand the significance to the organization that Bartleby's linguistic mantra of consistently preferring not to represents. At the same time, an

ethnographic reading of Melville's story provides a mechanism for identifying the larger institutional process at work in Melville's story, one that contributes to the reproduction of a system of social relations in the workplace that requires subordination and compliance to insure its success.

As this discussion of "Bartleby the Scrivener" suggests, the application of social science methods can be a useful tool for literary analysis. Characters in fiction occupy many organizational spaces, from law courts and tribal structures to medical and military institutions. The tools provided by ethnographic institutional methodologies can be useful in opening up an understanding not only of how these organizations are structured but also of how those structures determine how the characters in those literary landscapes inhabit organizational spaces and come to operate there.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research and/or authorship of this article.

## References

- Anderson, W. (1981). Form and meaning in "Bartleby the scrivener." *Studies in Short Fiction*, 18, 383-393.
- Colella, A. (2001). Coworker distributive fairness judgments of the workplace accommodation of employees with disabilities. *The Academy of Management Review*, 26, 100-116.
- Deleuze, G. (1998). Bartleby or the formula (D. Smith & M. Greco, Trans.). In *Essays critical and clinical* (pp. 68-90). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- DeVault, M., & McCoy, L. (2006). Institutional ethnography: Using interviews to investigate ruling relations. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 15-44). London, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality, volume 1: An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Friedman, M. (1966). Bartleby and the modern exile. In H. P. Vincent (Ed.), *Bartleby the scrivener, Melville annual: A symposium* (pp. 64-81). Kent, OH: Kent State University Press.
- Giles, T. (2007). Melville's Bartleby the scrivener. *The Explicator*, 65(2), 88-92.
- Leary, L. (1979). B is for Bartleby. In M. Thomas Inge (Ed.), *Bartleby the inscrutable: A collection of commentary on Herman Melville's tale Bartleby the scrivener* (pp. 15-30). Hamden, CT: Archon.
- Mander, G. (2005). Defiant resistance in the service of the impoverished self: Herman Melville's Bartleby: An illustration of clinical casework. *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, 22, 217-226.
- McCoy, L. (2006). Keeping the institution in view: Working with interview accounts of everyday experience. In D. E. Smith (Ed.), *Institutional ethnography as practice* (pp. 109-127). London, England: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Melville, H. (1853a). Bartleby the scrivener. *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science and Art*, 2, 546-557.

- Retrieved from <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=putnams>
- Melville, H. (1853b). Bartleby the scrivener. *Putnam's Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art*, 2, 609-616. Retrieved from <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/serial?id=putnams>
- Mitchell, T. (1990). Dead letters and dead men: Narrative purpose in "Bartleby, the scrivener." *Studies in Short Fiction*, 27, 329-338.
- Smith, D. (1990). Textually mediated social organization. In D. Smith (Ed.), *Texts, facts, and femininity* (pp. 209-225). London, England: Routledge.
- Stark, J. (1979). Melville, Lemuel Shaw, and Bartleby. In M. Thomas Inge (Ed.), *Bartleby the inscrutable: A collection of commentary on Herman Melville's tale Bartleby the scrivener* (pp. 166-173). Hamden, CT: Archon.
- Stern, M. (1979). Towards Bartleby the scrivener. In D. J. MacMillan (Ed.), *The stoic strain in American literature: Essays in honour of Marston LaFrance* (pp. 19-43). Toronto, Ontario, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Whitehead, F., Liese, B., & O'Dell, M. (1990). Melville's Bartleby the scrivener: A case study. *New York State Journal of Medicine*, 90, 17-22.

### Author Biography

**Lori Duin Kelly** was a professor of English at Carroll University for thirty years. She is the author of a book on Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and editor of a text on cultural constructions of the body, as well as articles that explore the intersection of gender and medicine. Her work in retirement is exploring ways in which disciplines in the social sciences can open up new understandings of canonical texts.